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->From the Editor's Keyboard           "Saying it like it is!"
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Spring is finally here! Well, it certainly feels this way this past week. One wouldn't imagine that we're well into the Fall season, in early November. I have no problem dealing with this kind of warm weather! I liken this weather to what could be referred to as the "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" syndrome - not too hot and not too cold - just right! It's forecast to "cool" off a little this weekend, making it almost perfect conditions for cleaning up some leaves; the trees have finally decided to void themselves of most of their leaves!

Until next time...

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MiNT Cross-tools for Ubuntu 15.10 "Wily Werewolf"
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Hello.

Ubuntu 15.10 "Wily Werewolf" has been released recently.
So I have rebuilt the GCC cross-tools for it (32 and 64-bit).

They are available at the same place as usual:
<http://vincent.riviere.free.fr/soft/m68k-atari-mint/ubuntu.php>

Enjoy!

PS: 6 months ago, I missed the release Ubuntu 15.04 "Vivid Vervet". So I have also rebuilt the cross-tools for it.

--
Vincent Rivière

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StarCraft 2: Legacy of the Void - Nova Covert Ops Announced

Blizzard has announced plans for post-launch content that will be a part of its upcoming StarCraft 2 expansion, Legacy of the Void. Following launch, the expansion will be supported by series of single-player mission packs titled Nova Covert Ops.

GameSpot interviewed StarCraft 2: Legacy of the Void senior designer Kristopher Howl about what to expect from Nova Covert Ops, when it will be released, and why the studio decided to develop single-player post-launch content for the game.

GameSpot: Tell us more about Nova Covert Ops. What type of game is it? What audience are you targeting with it?

Howl: So for Nova Covert Ops, this is content for players that have really enjoyed the campaign experience, which is a vast amount of players. The vocal majority comes from multiplayer but we have a huge player base that really enjoys campaign and that's really all they play. So now we're offering more content for those players and similar to the prologue where we have the three missions. Except with Nova Covert Ops we will have that little story interaction that you're used to with the campaign where you can upgrade your units. So with Nova's background, being a ghost, she unlocks some unique abilities for units that have this more techy approach to them. She'll be able to upgrade her own weapons, gear slots as well, like helmets that adjust visors so she gets special abilities to take into missions with her. She'll be present on the ground for you to run around and control. By equipping these items you will have new abilities in that mission to engage with.

It sounds like you're specifically focusing on Nova, and less of the army management side of things?

No, there will definitely be the army management side of StarCraft as well. That will be present. But she will have your Terran units that you're used to playing throughout Wings of Liberty, but she'll have her own unique upgrades that apply to those units that change them up a little bit, and how they play.

There will be moments where it's just you and Nova running through some spaces, but you'll definitely have you

army-building missions as well.

Story-wise, will this all be a part of the StarCraft canon?

It will tie into some of Nova's lore. This is really a chance to explore her history a bit more, explain what the Terran dominion's been up to since the events of Legacy of the Void. It is taking place some time after the events of Legacy of the Void, the dust has settled, the Terran Dominion is trying to repair their homeworlds and the lives of their people. This will kick off on a tangent that explores Nova's world a little more.

Will this purely be a single-player experience?

Nova Covert Ops will be yes, but separate to the Covert Ops offering we'll also be pushing content for our co-op experience.

Is this going to be released as an expansion or more as an add-on DLC?

It's not going to be a full-blown campaign like Void etc. It's a shorter experience. There will be nine missions broken into three mission packs.

And you'll be rolling them out episodically?

That's what we're aiming for, yes.

Any release timeframe you could give us?

We are aiming to get the first one out by the start of next year. No exact date yet. We're just really trying hard to get it out for early next year.

In terms of overarching plans for the Starcraft 2 series, is that where it all ends, or is that something you're experimenting with?

So we haven't announced plans beyond Nova Covert Ops. We're certainly taking lessons that we've learned with Heroes and Hearthstone, and their approach to content, and we're looking to see how this goes.

The fact that she's established and that she's a ghost, we get a lot of awesome avenues to come up with some unique mission mechanics that we haven't had the opportunity to do before.

StarCraft 2: Legacy of the Void will be released for PC on November 10. Blizzard will also be kicking off its annual BlizzCon convention over the weekend. GameSpot is in attendance and covering the show, so be sure to check back on site for more announcements as they roll out.

The Most Ambitious Space Game in History Has Raised \$94 Million.
So Where Is It?

Would you pay \$15,000 for a bunch of virtual spaceships?

That's not a misprint. Go to the website for the upcoming, as-yet-incomplete space simulation Star Citizen and you'll find, among the many items available for purchase, The Completionist — an embarrassingly expensive suite of 66 digital spacecraft, from the massive Idris-P Frigate to the sleek F7C-S Hornet Ghost.

Or, you can buy your spacecraft one at a time. The cheapest cost about \$20; others run several hundred. One — the Javelin — will set you back \$2,500, but you can't get one, because they were released last December in a limited run of 200 and sold out within minutes.

If this all sounds nuts — and it should — then you don't know Star Citizen. Frankly, no one really does yet, because despite raking in a record-setting \$94 million in crowdfunded cash (officially making it the biggest crowdfunded project ever), it's a year behind schedule.

Because of this delay and those conspicuously large price tags, Star Citizen and its developer, Cloud Imperium Games, have drawn intense scrutiny and become a lightning rod for a host of issues: the ethics of crowdfunding, the limits of in-game purchases, and the trustworthiness of the video game hype machine.

It all began three years ago, when veteran game designer Chris Roberts launched a crowdfunding campaign for Star Citizen on both Kickstarter and a proprietary site. During this initial run, he raised an impressive \$6 million.

Roberts rose to fame as the developer of the Wing Commander series of space simulations that were hugely popular in the 1990s. Following the release of 2003's Freelancer, he switched gears and focused on a second career as a film producer. That didn't quite pan out, leading him to dream up a bigtime return to games with Star Citizen, a complete universe where any number of adventures can take place. Players would cruise a vast universe, able not only to fly spaceships but also to walk around inside them and participate, first-person-shooter style, in boarding actions and hand-to-hand combat.

In other words, it's the ultimate space game by one of the genre's pioneers.

Fans eagerly answered Roberts's call. Their enthusiastic participation propelled the crowdfunding effort to its now-stratospheric numbers; a rabid microculture has developed around the game. The game's forums are packed with users (the General Chat subforum alone has over 68,000 separate threads). There are fan organizations with thousands of members. There's a copious library of fan fiction. You can read, right now, a 66-page flight manual for just one of the dozens of flyable ships.

But the game itself, originally estimated to release in November 2014, remains a long way from completion. This is not, in itself, so unusual. Games run behind schedule all the time. Some delayed games were so good that all was immediately forgiven (see: Half-Life 2). Some weren't (see: Duke Nukem Forever). Still, good

or bad, such games were financed in the traditional way, by investors and publishers. Consumer money wasn't on the line until after release.

In the case of Star Citizen, consumer money has created what some consider a disaster in the making.

Star Citizen's most persistent critic has been Derek Smart, an independent developer who's no stranger to controversial space-simulation projects, having fought many an online flame war over his troubled Battlecruiser series in the 1990s.

In recent months, Smart has played the role of gadfly, composing lengthy screeds in which he alleges severe mismanagement and even fraudulent behavior at Cloud Imperium. The four-year, \$90m+ Star Citizen video game project, is no longer a going concern, Smart wrote in an October 6 blog post. The project is FUBAR and there is no going back.

Meanwhile, an October 5 Escapist article, relying heavily on quotes from anonymous ex-employees, bolstered the perception of Cloud Imperium as a dysfunctional company unable to build the game it had promised, and of Roberts as a starry-eyed dreamer more interested in shooting expensive cutscenes with Gary Oldman than in buckling down to release Star Citizen. The article sparked threats of legal action against the Escapist, while a parallel legal dispute blossomed between Smart and Roberts over the latter's claim that Smart's activities constituted stalking and defamation.

In short, trying to sort out fact from fiction and truth from vendetta is untangling a Gordian knot of Internet rage. But where there's smoke, there's often at least a little fire, and there's a lot of smoke here.

Yet in the midst of all this, Cloud Imperium has carried on, projecting confidence that Star Citizen will eventually release and be every bit as good as Roberts claims. A few weeks ago, the developers showcased new gameplay footage and cutscenes before cheering fans at CitizenCon 2015 (yes, the unreleased game already has its own convention) in Manchester, England.

Far from being embarrassed about Star Citizen's overreaching ambition, Roberts insists it's the project's strength. I don't want to build a game. I want to build a universe, he says, perhaps deliberately echoing the famous tag line of Origin Systems, where he began his career: We create worlds.

For now, the only part of the game that's playable is Arena Commander, a dogfighting simulation that allows backers to pilot some of the game's many spacecraft in small-scale multiplayer battles and races. Other segments including a story-based campaign called Squadron 42 and the vaunted Persistent Universe, which is supposed to tie everything together have not been given release dates. Meanwhile, other space sims like David Braben's Elite Dangerous and Hello Games' equally ambitious No Man's Sky have either launched already or are cleared for takeoff.

None of this would matter at all had Roberts not opted to largely

fund his vision through crowdfunding, which has in large part been a boon to gaming.

Just ask the makers of smaller, niche games like Pillars of Eternity or Wasteland, which have traded on the nostalgia older gamers have for the hits of their youth. It s a way for once-defunct genres to get a second chance without jumping through corporate hoops. Crowdfunding is a form of communication, a way for potential customers to tell developers, ahead of time, that they would not only pine on message boards for their product, but would put up hard-earned cash to make it a reality.

But when the crowdfunded tally gets as high as \$94 million, the game is no longer the plucky underdog it s the 800-pound gorilla. And a company with a 200-strong development team, as Cloud Imperium now is, burns through a lot of cash each month. Though the Star Citizen website s Terms of Service page claims refunds will be forthcoming to any who request them if the game hasn t launched within 18 months of its estimated release date, it s reasonable to wonder whether there would be enough money to reimburse everyone should the majority ask for their money back.

And it s hard not to be put off by those outrageous price tags for virtual goods. The price for a traditional video game usually falls somewhere between \$20 and \$60, depending on the genre, the platform, the publisher, and how long ago it was released. To charge hundreds, even thousands, for a tiny slice of a game, savors of exploitation.

Yet this is an increasingly common practice. Many contemporary games offer \$100-plus packages of virtual coins and depend on whales, who, like serious gamblers, are willing to pay money far out of proportion to any conventional estimation of the value they re getting.

To play devil s advocate, is Star Citizen s Javelin spacecraft any more useless than a \$2,000 decorative rug? Is this just a matter of antivirtual chauvinism? At least in Star Citizen s case, the whales are getting complex, handcrafted digital objects for their money or will be when (if?) the game actually launches.

Questions of mismanagement aside, Roberts and his team sincerely want to make this game. Star Citizen was clearly not designed as a long con, and the project was not launched with malice aforethought. Nobody started out trying to bilk anyone out of their money.

But it s nonetheless troubling that Cloud Imperium seems, for the moment, more efficient at generating revenue than it is at producing the game it was founded to produce. With questionable free-to-play models and in-app purchases generating considerable controversy in recent years, Star Citizen putting the money cart before the horse obviously strikes a nerve. Is a game company about making money or making games? Ostensibly both, but the order in which those occur is pretty important.

So is the plight of Star Citizen. If the game turns out to be the fiasco its detractors already claim it is, it will send serious ripples across the game industry and crowdfunding in general. The

pressure is on, for sure, and only time will tell if Cloud Imperium can keep it together and deliver on its heady promises and hefty bank account.

Activision Blizzard To Purchase Candy Crush Studio King

With the deal expected to be completed by spring 2016, Activision Blizzard announced that they've signed a definitive agreement to purchase King Digital Entertainment (Candy Crush) for \$5.9 billion.

According to the accompanying press release, Activision Blizzard believes that the addition of King's highly-complementary business will position Activision Blizzard as a global leader in interactive entertainment across mobile, console and PC platforms, and positions the company for future growth.

With the King acquisition, Activision Blizzard gains two of the top five highest-grossing mobile games in the US with Candy Crush Saga and Candy Crush Soda Saga. They add that Candy Crush joins the world's most successful console game franchise (Call of Duty), and the world's most successful PC franchise (World of Warcraft).

Activision Blizzard expects that this leading content, together with expertise across subscription, upfront purchase, free-to-play and micro-transaction business models will enhance Activision Blizzard's position as one of the world's most successful interactive entertainment companies, they said.

Activision Blizzard CEO Bobby Kotick said:

The combined revenues and profits solidify our position as the largest, most profitable standalone company in interactive entertainment. With a combined global network of more than half a billion monthly active users, our potential to reach audiences around the world on the device of their choosing enables us to deliver great games to even bigger audiences than ever before.

Minecraft Creator Notch weighed in on the deal:

King sold to Activision? What a bunch of sellouts! How dare they oh wait hm nevermind uhhh damn

(Congratulations, my old bosses!)

10:51 PM - 2 Nov 2015

PS4 Sales Still Outpacing PS2, Closing in on 30 Million

Sony has released its financial report for the three months ending September 30, 2015, revealing PS4 sales continue to soar.

4 million consoles were sold in the three months before Sony's recently-announced price cuts came into effect, up from 3.3

million units in the same period last year. This brings the lifetime total to 29.3 million - by comparison, star-performer the PS2 had only managed 24.99 million in the same timeframe, though the original Wii managed 34.55 million.

As a result of this overperformance, the company has now raised the number of PS4 consoles it expects to sell this year from 16.5 million to 17.5 million. Last year it sold 14.8 million.

Notably, the company also flagged an increase in PlayStation 4 software sales, though PS3 game sales are naturally starting to dwindle.

Overall, the Games and Network Services division brought in over \$3 billion in revenue, up 16 percent year-on-year, while operating income was \$199 million, up 9.8 percent. The division is now bringing in more money than TVs, mobiles, movies and music.

The whole company reported \$15.8 billion in revenue in the second quarter, with a net profit of \$280 million.

Activision Blizzard's Strategy for World Conquest

Activision Blizzard has become the No. 2 publicly traded game company in the world, second only to China's Tencent. It has done so by being singularly committed to making the world's biggest video game franchises and putting everything behind them. That's the company's continuing strategy to dominate gaming and the larger entertainment industry, and it communicated the full depth of that strategy at its investor day today ahead of the Blizzcon event in Anaheim, California.

Activision has occasionally diverged from that strategy over 35 years, but it has always come back to it. When current CEO Bobby Kotick took over an ailing Activision in 1991, the company had become known as lack of vision, Kotick recalled in a video. They had so little money that they had to make every game a hit. They still had passion. One of their earliest efforts, Return to Zork, a visual retelling of the Zork text adventure, was a wild success and it gave the company the capital to start making new games. That started the company's focus on a franchise strategy.

Fast forward to today, and Activision Blizzard has franchises that include Call of Duty, Destiny, Skylanders, Guitar Hero, Warcraft, StarCraft, Diablo, Hearthstone, and Candy Crush Saga, which comes via its \$5.9 billion pending acquisition of King. With the addition of King, the company will serve more than 500 million players in 196 countries (compared to 70 million before the deal). Kotick noted that the company would serve as many countries as the Coca-Cola company, where Kotick serves on the board.

Inspiration and creativity focused on the right priorities, Kotick said on stage at the company's investor day at the Blizzcon event in Anaheim, California. This is why our games are so important to the lives of hundreds of millions of people. We are expanding our capabilities across platforms, genres, audience

demographics, and geographies but always in the service of our players.

Kotick said the focus will continue to be on providing the best games. He said the company is delving deeper into esports with the creation of a new division focused on it, and it is also creating a movie studio to develop films and TV shows, created internally to take advantage of the company's franchises.

As we launch our franchises in these broad, big, mass appeal ways, you'll see opportunities for other forms of engagement like consumer products, Kotick said.

Traditional video games are a mature industry, of course. Thomas Tippl, chief operating officer at Activision Blizzard, said on stage that in the last decade, eight of the top ten titles come from well-known franchises every year in the core console and PC game business. From 2012 to 2015, only three new franchises broke into the top 10, including Activision Blizzard's Destiny. The average life of a top-ten franchise is more than 10 years.

We're now also seeing the mobile space mature in this regard, which is why we think now is the right time to invest in King, Tippl said.

In 2012, when Candy Crush Saga debuted, the average age of the top ten games on the mobile charts was a year. Five new franchises broke into the top 10 in 2012. In 2015, the average age is three years, and King is expected to have three of the top ten titles.

Activision Blizzard's digital business grew 22 percent this year. Its priorities include deepening engagement with franchises, and build enduring and beloved franchises with large, engaged social communities with whom the company has a direct connection, Tippl said.

On stage, Zacconi said King has 1,600 employees with 12 studios. That started from nothing in 2003, and it was just 665 two years ago.

This is the best team we could have joined in 2015, Zacconi said. Our vision is to serve everyone's gaming kingdom across all platforms. King delivers bite-sized experiences anytime, anywhere, Zacconi said.

King's franchises include Candy Crush, as well as lesser-known titles Bubble Witch, Farm Heroes, and Pet Rescue. The company has three top 15 hits for the past seven quarters in mobile. Next, under the combined business, King will take advantage of Activision Blizzard's franchises in the mobile market. And it is creating its own mid-core titles, or those that are hardcore in nature but played for short times, thanks to its own acquisition of Z2Live, for launch in 2016.

The reason I feel confident we can deliver on this plan is that we have built the team for it over the last 18 months, he said.

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->A-ONE Gaming Online      -   Online Users Growl & Purr!
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Everything old was new again at October's annual Portland Retro Gaming Expo, which overtook the city's major convention center for two full days of arcade play, retro tournaments, and presentations from some of gaming's biggest legends.

Maybe you want to purchase every issue of Nintendo Power magazine that you fell behind on as an early '90s fanboy, or compete against children of the '70s in Atari Combat, or see original Atari and Activision console game developers talk about squeezing every last pixel out of the 2600's hardware, or pick up a ton of colorful artwork based on classic characters. Events like the Portland Retro Gaming Expo will happily indulge you.

Looking for old games, guitar controllers, or magazines? The Portland Retro Gaming Expo had you covered.

Wait, what? Who is Zippy the Porcupine? And why's this for the Atari 2600?

Despite its impressive range, the show did have one unifying keynote panel a talk hosted by Pong inventor Al Alcorn.

Alcorn knows that he's not necessarily the founder of home video gaming, but he's pretty close. He was the third-ever employee of Atari, then known as the oddly named Syzygy Engineering. And the man who built Pong pretty much from scratch spoke at a panel that, like most of the content at the PGRX, was a recap of already known history and minutiae.

Mostly, Alcorn rehashed a few classic bygone Pong stories, including the intriguing fact that the home version was essentially a middle-finger reaction to Nolan Bushnell's insistence that it be made. "Making a home Pong would require a custom chip, and I couldn't make a custom chip, but Nolan wouldn't stop," Alcorn told the Portland crowd before saying that Bushnell "had the attention span of a golden retriever."

Alcorn also presented some funny rarities, particularly a letter exchange between himself and Bushnell about the creation of the Pong home version in which a single Alcorn question was answered by the all-caps word "NO" in Bushnell's handwriting. He also displayed a photo of the original home Pong prototype that was demonstrated to Sears, Roebuck and Co. executives in the '70s. There was even the utterly surreal experience of watching Al Alcorn watch his own appearance on 2006's Space Ghost: Coast to Coast. If you're a gaming fan who couldn't leave PGRX happy, we don't know what to tell you.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Supreme Court May Limit Class-action Lawsuits Against Tech Industry

The U.S. Supreme Court justices, hearing arguments in a closely watched tech industry case, sounded poised Monday to limit mass lawsuits from people who sued after seeing false information about themselves online.

Led by Chief Justice John Roberts, the court's conservatives said lawsuits should be limited to people who can show they were hurt in some way by inaccurate online data.

If the court ultimately rules that way, it would block or greatly shrink class-action claims, filed on behalf of millions of people, that have sent a scare through the tech industry.

The case of Spokeo vs. Robins asks a basic question about who can sue in an era of Web commerce when countless transactions take place online.

Can millions of consumers join a class-action suit if a company allegedly violates provisions of a federal law, such as the

measures that regulate credit information or prohibit unwanted phone calls and text messages? Or are these suits limited to people who can show they were actually harmed?

Spokeo, a "people search engine" based in Pasadena, was sued in a class claim brought on behalf of Thomas Robins, a Virginia man who said his profile was entirely inaccurate.

He was described as married with children, in his 50s and with a graduate degree and a professional job. None of that was true. Robins said he was unemployed and unmarried.

The 9th Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco cleared his suit to go forward because the Fair Credit Reporting Act sought to protect consumers from inaccurate credit reports and authorized damages of \$100 to \$1,000 for violations.

Justice Elena Kagan said Robins appeared to have a strong claim.

"Most people would feel they had been harmed," she said, if a company posted "false information about you." And Congress clearly thought that was a problem. "Don't we owe them a little respect?" she asked, referring to members of Congress.

The court's liberal justices appeared to agree with her.

But Justices Antonin Scalia and Anthony Kennedy joined with the chief justice in suggesting lawsuits must be limited to people who can show they suffered an actual injury.

Roberts cited the example of someone who is upset to find his unlisted telephone number posted online, but realizes the number is wrong. How can such a person claim an injury under the telephone privacy act? he asked.

The justices will meet behind closed doors to vote on the case, and they are likely to issue a decision early next year.

Internet Firms To Be Banned From Offering Unbreakable Encryption Under New Laws

Internet and social media companies will be banned from putting customer communications beyond their own reach under new laws to be unveiled on Wednesday.

Companies such as Apple, Google and others will no longer be able to offer encryption so advanced that even they cannot decipher it when asked to, the Daily Telegraph can disclose.

Measures in the Investigatory Powers Bill will place in law a requirement on tech firms and service providers to be able to provide unencrypted communications to the police or spy agencies if requested through a warrant.

Councils and taxman to be given power to view your internet history

The move follows concerns that a growing number of encryption services are now completely inaccessible apart from to the users themselves.

It came as David Cameron, the Prime Minister, pleaded with the public and MPs to back his raft of new surveillance measures.

He said terrorists, paedophiles and criminals must not be allowed a safe space online.

Ministers have no plans to ban encryption services because they have an important role in the protection of legitimate online activity such as banking and personal data.

But there is concern over some aspects of so-called end-to-end encryption where only the sender and recipient of messages can decipher them.

Terrorists and criminals are increasingly using such technology to communicate beyond the reach of MI5 or the police.

Thames House, British Intelligence Mi5 Headquarters, in Millbank, London
Thames House, the headquarters of MI5 Photo: EPA

On its website, Apple promotes the fact that it has, for example, no way to decrypt iMessage and FaceTime data when it is in transit between devices .

It adds: So unlike other companies messaging services, Apple doesn't scan your communications, and we wouldn't be able to comply with a wiretap order even if we wanted to.

Last month, Metropolitan assistant commissioner Mark Rowley, the country's most senior counter-terrorism officer, warned that for some firms it was a part of their strategy - they design their products in full recognition that they will be unable to help us because of the way they have designed them .

However, proposals to be published on Wednesday will, for the first time, place a duty on companies to be able to access their customer data in law.

A Home Office spokesman said: The Government is clear we need to find a way to work with industry as technology develops to ensure that, with clear oversight and a robust legal framework, the police and intelligence agencies can access the content of communications of terrorists and criminals in order to resolve police investigations and prevent criminal acts.

That means ensuring that companies themselves can access the content of communications on their networks when presented with a warrant, as many of them already do for their own business purposes, for example to target advertising. These companies' reputations rest on their ability to protect their users' data.

The Investigatory Powers Bill is also expected to maintain the current responsibility for signing off requests to snoop with the Home Secretary but with extra judicial oversight a move that is likely to anger civil liberty campaigners and some Tory backbenchers.

It will also require internet companies to retain the web browsing history of their customers for up to a year.

The bill is expected to face a tough route through parliament but Mr Cameron urged critics to back the measures.

He told ITV's This Morning: As Prime Minister I would just say to people 'please, let's not have a situation where we give terrorists, criminals, child abductors, safe spaces to communicate'.

"It's not a safe space for them to communicate on a fixed line telephone or a mobile phone, we shouldn't allow the internet to be a safe space for them to communicate and do bad things."

Lord Carlile, the former terrorism laws watchdog, said there had been a lot of demonization of the police and security services over their intentions for such information.

I think it is absurd to suggest the police and the security services have a kind of casual desire to intrude on the privacy of the innocent, he said.

They have enough difficulty finding the guilty. No-one has produced any evidence of casual curiosity on part of the security services."

Facebook Finally Changes Real-name Policy

Facebook on Friday finally changed the real-name policy that has made using the service difficult for drag queens, the LGBTQ community, Native Americans, those who use pseudonyms, and persecuted groups.

The Nameless Coalition, consisting of 75 human rights, digital rights, LGBTQ, and women's rights advocates - including the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) - had penned an open letter (PDF) to Facebook, on October 5, 2015, explaining why the policy is broken and how Facebook could mitigate the damages it causes.

The coalition included an appendix to the letter that contained multiple stories of how people have been harmed by the real-name policy.

A few of many stories, excerpted from the appendix:

Journalists and human rights activists in Vietnam have been flagged en masse and forced to stop using pen names on Facebook. One user, a mother with two imprisoned sons, had largely used her account to campaign for their release from prison. In every case, Facebook asked the activists to verify their identities. To make matters worse, in several cases, when the activists submitted their identity documents, Facebook unilaterally altered their accounts to list their legal names, without consent or notice.

Facebook enforced the policy against a user known as Lily in December 2014, forcing her to use her legal name. Only two weeks later a man who had, two decades earlier, beat and sexually abused Lily sent her a private message. My blood ran cold, I was sweating, and [having] heart palpitations opening the message."

In the United States, Native American Dana Lone Hill was locked out of her account and repeatedly refused reactivation even after submitting multiple IDs, a library card, and a piece of mail showing her Lakota name. As one Native user points out, "I think that Facebook has to have no general knowledge of Native Americans or their surnames."

On Friday, Facebook responded with its own letter.

Alex Schultz, Facebook's VP for growth and internationalization, published a letter answering the coalition's criticism and suggestions.

Schultz said that a Facebook team is now working on these changes and expects to test them in December:

A reduction in the number of people asked to verify their name on Facebook, when they're already using the name people know them by.

Making it easier for people to confirm their name if necessary.

One thing at issue has been Facebook's failure to provide technical details and documentation on the process of submitting identity information, including where and how it's stored, for how long, and who can access it.

The Nameless Coalition had asked Facebook to provide users with the ability to submit the information using PGP or another common form of encrypted communication, so that their identity information would be protected during the submission process.

Done, Schultz said: going forward, IDs submitted to Facebook as part of the identity verification process will be encrypted when they're temporarily stored on Facebook's servers.

What's more, Facebook's ability to decrypt the IDs will expire after 30 days, and the IDs will be deleted shortly thereafter.

More changes in the works include requiring people to provide additional information about why they're reporting a profile.

As it now stands, it's trivial for any Facebook user to file reports claiming that a fellow user is violating the real-name policy. Abuse reporters haven't had to submit any evidence whatsoever to support their claims.

As the Nameless Coalition had pointed out, those reporting supposed abuse can "file as many reports as they wish, as quickly as they wish, allowing targeted reporting sprees" - including those targeting Vietnamese journalists and activists and many others in South and Southeast Asia and the Middle East.

In fact, it turned out that one, lone Facebook user was behind the mass-reporting of the accounts of drag queens, drag kings, transgenders and others in the LGBT community that in September

2014 had resulted in the account lock-outs of multiple performers.

Schultz said that changes to the real-name policy include a new process that will let people provide more information about their circumstances - information that Schultz said should help Facebook's Community Operations team better understand individuals' situations, including the reasons why people can't confirm their names, and thus help the company to potentially make future changes.

These are substantive changes, but make no mistake, Facebook's real-name policy isn't going away.

Facebook will still require people to use the name that their friends and family know them by. It has no plans to change that, given that the company continues to stand by its belief that the policy helps make Facebook safer.

Schultz:

When people use the name others know them by, they are more accountable for what they say, making it more difficult to hide behind an anonymous name to harass, bully, spam or scam someone else.

In fact, when Facebook reviewed its reports from earlier this year, it found that bullying, harassment or other abuse is eight times more likely to be committed by people using names other than their own than by the rest of the Facebook community, Schultz said:

When profiles were reported to us and our reviewers asked the person to verify the name on the profile, our analysis showed that the people behind these inauthentic profiles were much more likely to be involved in some form of bad behavior.

Still, Schultz said, Facebook is well aware that the current process doesn't work for everyone.

It's a tough balancing act, he said, but the company is "deeply invested in making this better."

I've seen first hand how people - including LGBT people - can be bullied online by people using fake or impersonating accounts. At the same time, I've walked with our head of Community Operations at Pride in San Francisco, and heard the feedback from the LGBT and other communities that our policy and tools aren't enabling people to be their authentic selves on Facebook.

We also understand the challenges for many transgender people when it comes to formally changing one's name. That's why we're making changes now and in the future, and will continue to engage with you and all who are committed to looking after the most vulnerable people using our product.

It's a balance to get this right - we want to find a line that minimizes bullying but maximises the potential for people to be their authentic selves on Facebook.

One of the performers targeted in the reporting spree on the LGBT community in September 2014, Sister Roma, said in a Facebook post that she's scheduled to meet with Facebook and reps from key LGBT organizations on Tuesday (Nov. 3).

Stay tuned, she said. But at this point, it's looking like Facebook's truly listening:

It looks like our hard work and protests are finally going to result in some tangible changes to the fake name reporting option.

Twitter Inc Gets Slammed By Users For The Heart Like Button

[Earlier this week], Twitter Inc made a change to its social network with the possible hope of attracting new users, but instead ended up hurting its existing ones. Under the recently appointed chief executive's command, the company unveiled a new feature that replaced the traditional favorite button with a new like one. Watching the star icon changed to a heart, Twitter users unanimously expressed their outrage within hours of the update, ridiculing the company for trying to be more like Facebook Inc.

Ever since the co-founder, Jack Dorsey, was made interim CEO, the company started making big moves and saw changes in its strategy. After Mr. Dorsey was granted the job permanently, he announced that bringing in more users to the social network was his top priority, amid substantial shifts taking place in the company. One of the efforts made by Twitter to achieve Mr. Dorsey's prioritized goal was to change the historic favorite button with the like one.

The fact that it is called like is probably the first thing that got the users to face-palm, but there are a lot of angles as to why Twitter is getting so much hate from its stagnant user-base. Firstly, Twitter users had a lot of love for the favorite star button and found it more expressive, than how star or favorite buttons are commonly used in other networks and applications. Twitter users gradually and subtly built and agreed on different meanings to when a tweet gets a star, depending on the situation.

Initially, the star button means that a user considers a tweet his favorite. However, the star button is also often used as a hate-fave button, when users are so enraged by a specific tweet that they sarcastically add a star to it rather than retweet or share it. Then, there's a flirt-fave that users subtly use to let their crush know when the tweet is smart or funny. Then, there's the favorite that is used to acknowledge someone's response to the tweet, without having to elongate the conversation.

Now, the new heart brings love into the situation, which makes it an awkward circumstance that previously wouldn't have been with the star. No one wants to like or heart a tweet that they want to sarcastically mark as their favorite. Similarly, pressing the heart button on your crush's tweet may not be so comfortable,

since no one wants to feel like a creep.

Last but not the least, the like sounds like a rip-off of Facebook. The Like was originally on the biggest social network and has been almost always attached to it. Liking content on Facebook is the most done activity carried out on a daily basis, more than shares or comments. Now, Facebook is also shifting towards the belief that the Like button is not the most suitable way to express a user's exact opinion. In case of tragic events or natural disasters, Liking a certain news piece can give off the very wrong impression to other users. Thus, Facebook is coming up with more buttons and ways in which users can express their emotions.

With the introduction of the heart like, Twitter is not only late to the party, which Facebook is the chief guest of, but it is dressed completely inappropriate. People look to Twitter as something more than a social network. They see it as a platform where people can converse over important issues. Twitter offers services for spreading information and news and was recently ranked as the most important social platform for sales people. Thus, the new Like button contradicts the market's and company's perception of Twitter, as it adds an air of informality, while taking away the expressive feature that evolved over years and was adopted unanimously.

Thus, Twitter's new heart button in place of the star is a complete flop. While the company works on making its network easier to use and more attractive, in order to induce user-growth, a goal it has been long struggling with, it has instead ended up repelling its current loyal userbase. However, don't be sad just yet, for we have ways to undo what Mr. Dorsey did to your Twitter.

Those who use the Chrome web browser can download extensions from the App Store to get their Favorite Stars back. The quick and easy way is downloading Twitter Star that automatically changes the heart icon to the star one. Alternatively, one may download Twitter Favorite and change the icon manually. However, using these extensions will only change the icon for you and the rest of the Twitter world, who aren't using them, will see hearts instead of the star. We sincerely advise Twitter to stop looking at Facebook for ideas and instead devise their own ways.

Microsoft Gets Stingy with Free Online Storage

Microsoft is getting stingy with online storage.

The company just cut the free space it offers through its OneDrive service by two-thirds, making it the second major company to retreat from a consumer cloud-storage boom that tempted users with price cuts and ever-larger free offers.

Starting next year, Microsoft will cut its free option to 5 gigabytes, down from 15 gigabytes now. Microsoft says the new allotment is enough for about 6,600 Office documents or 1,600 photos.

Earlier this year, Amazon eliminated a free 5 gigabyte storage plan, although it still offers that amount to those who pay for its Prime loyalty program.

Microsoft is also effectively doubling prices for some storage plans. It will charge \$2 a month for 50 gigabytes of storage, including the free allotment, rather than the 100 gigabytes it currently offers at that price. The company is eliminating a \$4-a-month, 200 gigabyte plan.

Subscribers to Microsoft's Office 365, which offers word processing, spreadsheet and other apps starting at \$7 a month, will now be limited to 1 terabyte, or 1,000 gigabytes, of storage. The company is killing off an "unlimited" option that it said a "small number of users" had abused by backing up numerous personal computers and storing entire movie collections.

As with similar services from Google, Dropbox and others, OneDrive can store just about any type of files. Apps can automatically sync what you store on a device.

Under CEO Satya Nadella, Microsoft has emphasized mobile and online services such as OneDrive over traditional sales of Windows and Office software for personal computers. The company has offered services for free as a way to hook people into using other services, such as Microsoft's ad-supported Bing search engine and the Office 365 subscription.

Microsoft didn't explain why it was cutting back its storage offer, or why it advertised an "unlimited" option if actually using large amounts of storage posed a problem. The company declined to comment beyond a blog post it published Monday night.

Microsoft says it will give people time up to a year in some cases to remove files that exceed its new limits.

Here's a look at some of the alternatives:

DROPBOX: People get only 2 gigabytes for free, but can earn bonuses by getting friends to sign up or by uploading photos automatically from phones. After that, it's \$10 a month for a terabyte of space. Business plans with unlimited storage cost \$15 a month per person, with a minimum of five people.

GOOGLE DRIVE: It's 15 gigabytes of free storage to start, but that includes Gmail messages on the account. Photos of up to 16 megapixels, which covers most phones, won't count toward the limit. For more storage, prices range from \$2 a month for 100 gigabytes to \$300 for 30 terabytes.

APPLE'S ICLOUD: Free storage starts at 5 gigabytes, which includes what's needed for iPhone backups. Those needing more can pay \$1 a month for 50 gigabytes, \$3 for 200 gigabytes or \$10 for 1 terabyte. iCloud storage works best with Apple devices.

AMAZON CLOUD DRIVE: Amazon offers unlimited photo storage and 5 gigabytes for video and other files for \$12 a year, or \$1 a month. For unlimited storage of all files, it's \$60 a year, or \$5 a month. Members of Amazon's \$99-a-year Prime loyalty program

get the lower option for free. Amazon eliminated its 5-gigabyte free plan in March.

YAHOO: Although Yahoo doesn't have a general file-storage service, it offers a generous 1 terabyte for e-mail and an additional 1 terabyte for photos and video through Flickr.

Snapchat Tries To Soothe Users Who Find New Policies #Scary!

You know that cute little ghost logo, implying that Snapchat's snaps are some kind of ethereal, transitory, "now-you-see-it, now-you-don't", disappearing phantasm?

Given the amount of angst over recent policy language tweaks, is it time for a new logo - something more along the lines of a ghost cast in concrete?

When Snapchat released a new app update last week, it came with a new privacy policy and new terms of service that left some users irked.

By agreeing with the company's new terms of service, users have been dismayed to find that they're now granting Snapchat "a worldwide, perpetual, royalty-free, sublicensable, and transferable license" to:

...host, store, use, display, reproduce, modify, adapt, edit, publish, create derivative works from, publicly perform, broadcast, distribute, syndicate, promote, exhibit, and publicly display that content in any form and in any and all media or distribution methods (now known or later developed).

"Perpetual": it's not exactly a term you'd associate with disappearing-image social media app Snapchat, which has, since its launch in 2011 (originally launched under the name Picaboo), become wildly popular, particularly with young people.

Snapchat on Sunday tried to soothe freaked-out users, saying that there's nothing new or scary here.

It said in a post that this has all been a misunderstanding: as long as content is set to be private, it's still going to be deleted off its servers:

First off, we want to be crystal clear: The Snaps and Chats you send your friends remain as private today as they were before the update. Our Privacy Policy continues to say as it did before that those messages "are automatically deleted from our servers once we detect that they have been viewed or have expired." Of course, a recipient can always screenshot or save your Snaps or Chats. But the important point is that Snapchat is not and never has been stockpiling your private Snaps or Chats. And because we continue to delete them from our servers as soon as they're read, we could not and do not share them with advertisers or business partners.

True, Snapchat said, the new Terms of Service grant the company a

broad license to use the content users create, but that's common to services like Snapchat and gives it a license necessary for doing things like sharing snaps submitted to Live Stories, replaying them or syndicating them, none of which is new.

The updated terms of service inform users that Snapchat and its business partners reserve the right to use:

...your name, likeness, and voice in any and all media and distribution channels (now known or later developed) in connection with any Live Story or other crowd-sourced content you create, upload, post, send, or appear in.

It tried to be clear about how the Privacy Policy and users' own privacy settings could restrict the scope of that license so that users' "personal communications continue to remain truly personal," Snapchat said, but nonetheless, freak-out ensued.

More from the new privacy policy:

We can't guarantee that messages and corresponding metadata will be deleted within a specific timeframe. Keep in mind that we may also retain certain information in backup for a limited period of time or as required by law. This is true even after we've deleted messages and corresponding metadata from our servers.

Snapchat's popularity has much to do with its so-called "disappearing" photo messages that last up to 10 seconds and which can't be viewed again once opened.

At least, that's what the company was once in the habit of claiming. Naked Security poked holes in that claim back in 2013.

Snapchat has some common-sense language in its policies that state what critics, including Naked Security, have pointed out for a while: snaps can be captured by various software or by screenshot, or simply photographed.

At any rate, Snapchat's popular for more than sending nude images. (Though that sure was a problem with The Snappening of 2014, when at least 100,000 snaps got pried out of a third-party site that allowed Snapchat users to save snaps.)

Researchers recently found that Snapchat's mundane, non-archived messages make users feel like they're having face-to-face conversations - the kind of non-recorded exchange that takes place within close relationships and actually appears to leave users feeling happier than they do on Facebook.

But in light of the new privacy policy and terms of service, some Snapchat users weren't exactly what you'd describe as happy.

Actor and former White House Associate Director of Public Engagement Kal Penn is being credited with first stirring the user base on Thursday when he pointed out what looked like major changes to Snapchat's policy:

Kal Penn ? @kalpenn

Read the new @Snapchat privacy/legal policies before deciding

whether to click yes. Scary stuff in there, kids.

Besides the new "perpetual" right to user content, the new privacy policy also allows users' (non-private!) content to "be shared with other Snapchatters and potentially the public at large."

Users are being asked to accept the new terms after downloading the latest version of the app. But the details aren't presented upfront: rather, you have to dig around to get at them.

The new terms were viewed by many as a rather stark contrast with the former version of Snapchat's privacy policy, which as of November 2014 stated that "delete is our default", adding that:

In most cases, once we detect that all recipients have viewed a message, we automatically delete it from our servers.

Messages in Snapchat's newly expanded Replay feature, or those added to the My Story feature and its Snapcash payment feature, have always been saved to Snapchat servers.

The new policies creeped out users who feared that Snapchat was grabbing the right to use their content however it sees fit.

One such:

Prascilla Upadhaya @pmoneyyy13

I can't sleep so I just read Snapchat's terms and conditions, and privacy policy.... Oh dear

And more of the same:

PALOMA MICHELLE @Palomaofficial

@Stefano pretty awful. We lost our privacy years ago... Only getting worse.

It sounds like the new policies aren't all that different from Snapchat's old policies, at any rate: the company says the main reasons it rewrote the policies aren't to give it a perpetual license to grab user content (unless it hasn't been marked as private, so it might be a good time to check your privacy settings).

Rather, it was to make the policy easy to understand, in plain language that reads like the way that people actually talk.

Crafting a policy that mimics the way that people talk doesn't keep miscommunication from creeping in, obviously!

Microsoft and Red Hat Announce New Open Source Partnership

In what Microsoft is describing as perhaps its deepest partnership with another major enterprise infrastructure player to date, the company is joining forces with leading Linux and open source provider Red Hat to ensure that their respective

operating systems and cloud platforms technologies interoperate.

The partnership, announced today, will involve a Red Hat engineering team moving to Redmond to provide joint technical support for Red Hat Enterprise Linux workloads running in the Microsoft Azure public cloud and on its hybrid cloud offerings. The pact also calls for applications developed in the Microsoft .NET Framework language to run on RHEL, OpenShift and the new Red Hat Atomic Host container platform.

If describing this pact as the deepest partnership ever sounds like hype, neither Microsoft or Red Hat has made such a claim with other jointly announced partnerships.

"We don't do this depth and level of support with any other partner at this point," said Paul Cormier, Red Hat's president of products and technologies, during a Web conference announcing the pact. "It's a much more comprehensive partnership than we have with any of our other public cloud providers. The colocation of our support teams is really a significant differentiator for our enterprise customers."

The other differentiator is that Windows and RHEL are the most widely deployed enterprise server platforms, he said. Scott Guthrie, Microsoft's EVP of Cloud and Enterprise, who was on the webcast with Cormier, agreed. "I am not aware of us doing anything like this with any other partner before," Guthrie said.

Making the agreement even more noteworthy is it's coming from companies that once had nothing but disdain for each other. "There wasn't much trust there," Cormier said flatly.

The devil will be in the details and execution of what the two onetime rivals announced today and whether it lives up to its promise. Specifically there are five components to what the two companies hope to deliver:

Combined support services for hybrid cloud including Red Hat products and on-premises customer environments running on Microsoft Azure. "What this means is as we bring our solutions together to solve customers' real problems," Cormier said. "We need to do that in such a way that we can really give enterprise class support that our customers want, need and expect." To accomplish this, he said Red Hat will collocate its engineers with Microsoft's so when issues or questions arise regarding integration points, their respective engineers will work together to address them.

Red Hat will use the newly open sourced .NET technologies in its platforms including RHEL, its OpenShift cloud PaaS offering and Red Hat Atomic Host, the company's container offering. This integration will let developers build applications that include .NET services, which could be more appealing now that Microsoft has open sourced the framework. "I think this will give us greater interoperability across the technologies and really start to give our customers the heterogeneous world that they really want," Cormier said.

Subscriptions to Red Hat products supported on Azure and Windows will be supported by Red Hat the same way that they are supported when running in traditional enterprise environments. Red Hat will also expand cooperation and work on Windows being

supported on Red Hat products including RHEL, OpenStack and OpenShift.

Red Hat's systems management offering Cloud Forms will include management of workloads on Azure. This should provide a common management pane for physical workloads and private cloud environments including its OpenStack distribution and OpenShift.

Microsoft is joining the Red Hat Certified Cloud and Service Provider Program (CCSP) to provide certified support for all of its products in Azure. With Microsoft joining the CCSP, Guthrie said that "Red Hat subscriptions will become portable to Microsoft Azure, with full Red Hat cloud access, enabling a consistent application platform on and off premises."

The two teams will start their collocation in Redmond over the next few weeks, Guthrie said. Over time, they may send teams to other locations as well. In the coming months, Guthrie said the two companies will let customers sign up and pay for licenses of Red Hat products on Azure on a usage basis.

"You'll see the integration of the Red Hat CloudForms offering with both Azure and our System Center VMM product that will enable consistent workload management in a hybrid way," Guthrie said. "We'll also enable Red Hat enterprise Linux Atomic Host on Azure and basically deliver a supported and certified small footprint container host that customers can use for enterprise Linux containers."

The deal is the latest evidence that Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella meant business when he said last year that "Microsoft loves Linux" and gave further evidence in our September cover story that Microsoft's DNA is changing. Now the onus is on both companies to make their respective wares interoperate as they promised today.

Share Your Feelings With This Emoji Keyboard

Stop searching your tablet or Web app for the perfect emoticon; just type it with the new Emoji Keyboard.

Developed by Austin-based EmojiWorks, the accessory looks like a generic wireless keyboard that an overzealous teenager adorned with colorful stickers. But this is 2015, so those "stickers" are actually emoji.

Available in three versions, the Emoji Keyboard syncs with Apple devices (and Windows 10 in beta), ensuring that poop, unicorn, and taco characters are only a tap away.

The base model comes with 47 "common emoji" thumbs up, smiley faces, robot head, heart, music notes for \$89.95. Priced at \$99.95, the Plus edition doubles the number of icons and unlocks the five skin-tone modifiers.

For the most emoji-literate users, a \$109.95 configuration promises more than 120 characters, for all your food, weather, sports, and animal needs.

Pre-order now for a \$10 discount on all three devices, which ship internationally via USPS. Plus, hand out your unique referral link to friends, and earn a \$5 credit and a higher place in the queue for each person who buys a keyboard.

"We didn't build a keyboard that has emoji, we built your life looking back at you from little square keys," the EmojiWorks' website said. "The keys on the Emoji Keyboard reflect the vast range of emotional experiences you have.

"Wherever life takes you, you go there with more than thoughts. You go with people and the emotions you share, the company continued. "Emoji may be the medium, but the message is all you."

Following Unicode's summer announcement of 41 new characters including nerd face, hot dog, popcorn, crab, and prayer beads Apple last month pushed out zodiac signs, the burrito, and a table-tennis paddle and ball, among other symbols, to iOS 9.1 devices.

Microsoft To Discontinue Windows 7 and 8.1 Next November

Still want to buy a PC that comes with Windows 7 or 8.1 from the get-go? You've got less than a year.

Updated late October, Microsoft's "Windows lifecycle fact sheet" shows October 31, 2016, as the "end of sales for PCs with Windows preinstalled" for both Windows 7 Professional and Windows 8.1, a change spotted by CNET sister site ZDNet. After that date, the only choice for consumers will be to purchase new computers with Windows 10 installed. The lone exception will be businesses with license agreements that entitle them to choose which version of Windows they want preinstalled.

The deadline puts pressure on consumers who have grown comfortable with Windows 7 and are reluctant to upgrade their operating system if they buy a new PC. For Microsoft, it's a necessary step toward its goal of having Windows 10 power 1 billion devices, which underscores the company's message that the new software can tie together PCs, tablets and mobile phones with apps that can run on any of them.

Windows 7 users may not realize it, but they actually caught a break. Microsoft typically sets the end-of-sales date for each version of Windows two years after the release of a new version. That means Windows 7's cutoff date should have been in October 2014, two years after the launch of Windows 8. The lack of consumer demand for Windows 8 prompted Microsoft to keep Windows 7 alive longer than expected.

Users who want to continue running Windows 7 on their existing PCs need not worry. Extended technical support will be available until January 14, 2020, when you'll still be able to get security patches, bug fixes and other updates. The same type of support for Windows 8 will run until January 10, 2023.

Despite the extended deadline for Windows 7 and 8.1, Microsoft is heavily pushing Windows 10.

The new operating system, which launched at the end of July, is available as a free upgrade to Windows 7 and 8.1 users for the first year. Microsoft has been using frequent pop-up notices to remind those who reserved a copy to install the new operating system. The company has also classified Windows 10 as an "optional update" and early next year expects to change that to a "recommended update," Windows and Devices Group executive vice president Terry Myerson said last week.

Microsoft Making Changes To Accelerate Windows 10 Upgrades

Microsoft announced some Windows 10 upgrade changes this week, mostly affecting consumer users.

One change of note for IT pros is that Windows Update will soon be showing Windows 10 as an "optional update" for Windows 7 and Windows 8.1 users. However, Microsoft plans to bump it up to a "recommended update" sometime "early next year." The operating system could automatically install as a recommended update, depending on an organization's Windows Update settings, Microsoft warned. However, it will be possible to roll back these Windows 10 upgrades within 31 days if wanted, according to Microsoft's announcement.

Such automatic updates could be costly on metered networks as Windows 10 is a 3GB download. Microsoft's announcement promised, though, that "Windows 10 will not automatically download updates on a metered connection unless there is a security issue addressed within the update."

Another change possibly affecting IT pros is that Microsoft plans to enhance its free Media Creation Tool to facilitate upgrades to Windows 10 Home and Pro editions. It's not clear exactly what will be enhanced, though, based on Microsoft's announcement. The tool can be downloaded and used to create 32-bit or 64-bit Windows 10 ISOs, either for upgrades or clean installs across multiple machines. The ISOs get created using DVDs or USB drives.

Microsoft's Media Creation Tool currently can't be used to install the Enterprise and Education editions of Windows 10. Instead, those volume licensees can access Windows 10 ISOs directly from Microsoft's Volume Licensing Service Center.

Windows 10 is being offered as a free upgrade, but it's mostly aimed at consumer users of Windows 7 and Windows 8.1. The free upgrade offer is not for domain-joined computers. Still, there could be scenarios where organizations will get offered the free upgrade across machines, and they possibly might use the Media Creation Tool to perform multiple upgrades. However, those upgrades right now are tied to Microsoft's upgrade reservation system, which means that reservations need to be set for each eligible Windows device, according to an early explanation by Microsoft MVP Andre da Costa, in a Windows 10 FAQ.

It seems, though, that such a scenario is changing. Microsoft explained today that it is now dispensing with the reservation system for Windows 10 upgrades. That system let people sign up to get Windows 10, but they'd still have to wait months for the installation to actually happen. Now, if the upgrade invite is accepted, Microsoft's Windows Update service will install Windows 10 right away.

Upgraders will get a notice when the bits are available to install Windows 10. If installed, they'll have 31 days to roll back to the old Windows, if wanted. The rollback is possible because Microsoft now keeps "a full copy of your previous operating system on your device -- including apps and settings," over that time period.

Those Windows users who are eligible for the free upgrade but who just don't want Windows 10 have a new option. They can use the Settings control in Windows 7 or Windows 8.1 to decline getting future Windows 10 upgrade notices, Microsoft's announcement indicated.

Users who never wanted Windows 10 still may have received some of the bits. Windows 10 upgrade files get stored in a hidden folder called "\$Windows-BT" and they reportedly arrived on machines that did not request an upgrade.

Microsoft's corporate goal is to get Windows 10 on 1 billion devices by its fiscal-year 2018. Its free upgrade offer bumped Windows 10 use to 75 million devices back in August. This month, Microsoft is claiming there are "more than 110 million devices" running Windows 10. To prod more upgrades, Microsoft is planning an experiment in the U.S. market for so-called "non-Genuine" Windows users.

Non-Genuine Windows users will get a "one-click" Windows 10 upgrade opportunity. It will allow them to change the device's product key on the fly via a link to the Windows Store. If the experiment proves successful in the U.S. market, Microsoft could expand it to other markets.

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